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September 15, 2004
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Grape Genomicist Joins Plant Genetics Resources Unit at Cornell's Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY

By Joe Ogrodnick

GENEVA, NY: Amanda J. Garris has joined the staff of the USDA-ARS Plant Genetic Resources Unit (PGRU) with a joint appointment in the department of horticulture at Cornell University at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY.

Garris, a Cornell graduate with a Ph.D. in plant breeding, will work on grape functional genomics. In functional genomics, scientists utilize the tools of molecular biology to better understand the various life processes in plants.

"Examples of functional genomics might include how one leaf communicates with others, or how a plant responds to cues in the environment to time its growth, or tolerates a stressfully cold winter," said Garris.

According to Garris, the diversity expressed in the genome of a grape's record is its "history." She notes that a grape's genome record can provide clues to which genes have been especially important in the survival of a particular plant species, how grape species in the Americas diverged from those in Europe and Asia, and perhaps how the genome might reveal unique adaptations.

"We are really delighted to have Amanda join our group," said Charles Simon, the research leader/supervisory geneticist at PGRU. "The critical mass of the grape genomics group at Geneva is definitely building, and she is already fitting in perfectly with the rest of our scientists."

The PGRU was formed in 1986 and has national responsibility to acquire, maintain, characterize, evaluate, document and distribute the genetic resources of certain vegetable crops, as well as apple, tart cherry, and cold-hardy grape < http://www.ars-grin.gov/gen/>. Currently, there are four scientists involved with grape improvement at the PGRU, all of whom have been hired in the past five years. They collaborate with more than 20 researchers at Cornell who conduct research in grape breeding, cultivation, crop protection and enology. The scientists are expected to relocate to the USDA's Grape Genetics Research Center that will be built at the Cornell Agriculture & Food Technology Park in Geneva in 2006.

Garris received her B.A. in religion from Oberlin College. After a circuitous route of internships on farms in Virginia, Minnesota, and Arkansas, she developed a desire to work with plants. "I was particularly interested in genetic diversity in crop species, and how this diversity plays out in an agro-ecosystem," she said. Her interests led her to the University of Washington in Seattle where she earned a B.S. in botany in 1997. She was subsequently accepted into the graduate program in the plant breeding department at Cornell.

"The initial goals of my research are twofold," Garris said. "I want to take advantage of the diversity maintained within the genetic resource collection in order to improve grape quality, and I hope my research will advance our basic knowledge of grape physiology."
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Last Modified: September 16, 2004
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